

# INTRODUCTION

## THE PLACE OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH IN THE BIBLE

When we open the Bible to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we find them tucked in between Chronicles and Esther. They are among the books we call “historical.” That seems appropriate because Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther provide us with information and insights into the circumstances of God’s people in the aftermath of the exile in Babylon. The history of Israel and Judah before the exile is contained primarily in the other historical books, from Joshua through the end of 2 Kings. Yet the present location of Ezra and Nehemiah was not always where we find them today. They are in their present location because that is where they were placed in the first translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into another language – Greek. That translation, the Septuagint (LXX), was begun by approximately 250 B.C. The order of the biblical books in the Septuagint was carried over into Latin translations, setting the pattern for subsequent European translations, including our English Bibles. But in Jewish Bibles Ezra and Nehemiah are joined as a single book and located in the last section of the Hebrew Bible.

The Jewish canon has three major sections. The first and most esteemed is the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah is also known as the Law of Moses; another name for it is the Pentateuch, “the (book of) five books.”<sup>1</sup>

The second section of the Hebrew canon is the Prophets, further divided between the Former and the Latter prophets. The Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 & 2), and Kings (1 & 2). These are considered four books; the division of Samuel and Kings

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<sup>1</sup>Pentateuch is derived from Gk. *pente*, “five” + *teuchos*, “a book.”

(as well as Chronicles) into two books each occurred with the translation of the LXX. This was necessary because Hebrew is written without vowels, while vowel-letters are essential to Greek. Books written in Hebrew that could be contained within a single scroll required more space when translated into Greek, thus resulting in the division indicated. The Latter Prophets consist of four books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. The Twelve are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. This arrangement of the Twelve is based generally on historical progression, with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi coming from the Persian period, the same period in which Ezra and Nehemiah were active.

The Writings comprise the third part of the Hebrew canon: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Chronicles (1 & 2). This section is also known as the Hagiographa, a name derived from Greek meaning “Holy Writings.”

The division of the Hebrew Bible into three sections is quite ancient. It is referred to in the first section of the book of Ecclesiasticus, which is also known as the Wisdom of Jesus (Joshua) Son of Sirach. Ecclesiasticus was written by a wise Jewish teacher sometime before 180 B.C.<sup>2</sup> He refers to “the law and the prophets and the others that followed them.” Similarly, in Luke 24:44 Jesus referred to “everything . . . written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” The psalms formed the opening and the longest section of the third division of the Hebrew canon. Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles close this section because they were written at least two centuries later than the history of the Former Prophets. That

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<sup>2</sup>Ecclesiasticus was held in high respect by Jews and was translated into Greek and became a part of the LXX. Ecclesiasticus and other books written in the intertestamental period were a part of the LXX. The honored but noncanonical books became known as the Apocrypha and were interspersed among the canonical books in Catholic Bibles. During the Protestant Reformation, the Apocrypha was rejected as having any doctrinal value by the reformers. In response, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) declared the Apocrypha Deuterocanonical, “the Second Canon.” It may be found in some Protestant Bibles, bound in a separate section between the Old and the New Testaments.

history ends with the Davidic king, Jehoiachin, living out his life in the palace of the Babylonian ruler (2 Kgs 25:27-30).

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

The downward spiral to destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah are clearly described in the books of Samuel and Kings.<sup>3</sup> The northern kingdom, Israel, ended with the Assyrian conquest and destruction of its capital, Samaria, in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom, Judah, survived approximately another century and a half, until rebellion against its Babylonian overlords brought it to a devastating end in 586 B.C. We must note in passing that a few years prior to the Babylonian conquest of Judah, during the reign of Josiah, the “Book of the Law”<sup>4</sup> was discovered in the temple while the sanctuary was undergoing renovation (2 Kgs 22).

The predicted destruction came in the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. As a result, many were killed. Of those who survived, some were deported and some were allowed to remain. The combined population of Jerusalem and the Judean hill country in the time of King Josiah is estimated to have been about 32,250.<sup>5</sup> The total number taken to Babylonia is unknown, but it must have consisted of several thousand; 10,000 were taken into captivity in 597 (2 Kgs 24:14), apparently including Ezekiel. Gedaliah was put in

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<sup>3</sup>The Babylonians acquired the Assyrian Empire through conquest. Nabopolassar destroyed its capital Nineveh in 612 B.C. with the help of the Medes. The fall of the great city was prophesied by Nahum. Nabopolassar’s son and successor, Nebuchadnezzar II, conquered Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and took into captivity to Babylon King Jehoiachin and the ruling elite of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 24:8-17). Ten years later (587), when Zedekiah rebelled against Babylonian rule, Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem. He besieged and destroyed it in 586 B.C., carrying away into captivity the bulk of the populace. The temple was destroyed and everything of value, including the gold and silver utensils (Dan 5:2), was transported to Babylon.

<sup>4</sup>This scroll was either a copy of Deuteronomy or contained it. See *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 303.

<sup>5</sup>Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, “Demography and Diatribes: Yehud’s Population and the Prophecy of Second Zechariah,” *Scripture and Other Artifacts*, ed. by M.D. Coogan, J.C. Exum, and L.E. Stager (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 282.

authority over those who remained in Judah. In 581 he was assassinated. Many not taken to Babylon fled to Egypt, fearing retribution from the Babylonians. This resulted in a further depopulation of the region. Those who left for Egypt forced the prophet Jeremiah to go with them (Jer 41:17–43:7).

The period of the First Temple (Solomonic) thus ended tragically, and the period of the Second Temple (postexilic) would not begin until the temple was reconstructed (520–516 B.C.). This left a gap of seventy years predicted by Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29) and noted by the writer of Chronicles (2 Chr 36:21). Little is known about the life of the deportees during those two generations except what can be gleaned from the Book of Ezekiel. His ministry took place between 593 and 571 B.C. During the period between Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem and the city's later destruction, communication seems to have continued between the exiled community and the remnant still in Jerusalem, at least through the time of Zedekiah. So some of Ezekiel's visions have to do with Jerusalem. His other oracles speak to the community in exile. Along with condemnation for past sins, they implant a word of hope and restoration.

Both the prophetic work of Jeremiah and of Ezekiel were a part of the broader search for religious meaning which the destruction of the temple and the loss of the homeland produced. None of the few remaining in Judah possessed the intellectual energy nor the opportunity for deep contemplation of the national tragedy. They were largely peasants working their plots of land, struggling to survive. Jeremiah characterized them as "poor figs" (Jer 29:17). Any hope for restoration was in the exiled community in Babylonia. Jeremiah, in a letter sent to those in exile in Babylon, gave them the word of the Lord to "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease" (29:4-7). The promise of a return to Jerusalem after seventy years follows (29:10-14). Their experience in exile was to lead to a transformation of religious perceptions and practices.

First, the provincial view of Yahweh as God of the Promised Land<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The idea that a deity was associated with a territory was widespread in the ancient Near East. King Mesha of Moab states that "Omri, king of Israel,

was modified. Within two generations that view was transformed into a profound conviction that he was Lord of the entire cosmos.<sup>7</sup> Even Nebuchadnezzar the powerful king of Babylon was his servant (Jer 25:9; 27:9; 43:10; Ezek 29:19-20; Ezra 5:12). By contrast, the Judeans who called the God of Israel “Lord,” had rebelled against true service to the Almighty. Second, the Judeans had thought that Jerusalem was indestructible because it was the Lord’s city and in it was the temple of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> That idea was obliterated with the destruction of both city and temple. Third, those in exile came to understand that they could worship Yahweh even in the sophisticated center of Babylonian idolatry. In Babylon the Judeans, who had themselves worshiped idols in their homeland, gave them up once and for all.<sup>9</sup> Separation from the surrounding Babylonian culture in terms of religious and social practices was the primary means of retaining an identity as the people of Yahweh.<sup>10</sup> This included the prohibition on intermarriage with those outside the exilic community, which we can infer from the similar prohibitions imposed by

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oppressed Moab for many days because Kemosh (chief Moabite deity) was angry with his country” (Moabite Inscription, lines 4-5). First Kgs 20:23 indicates that the Arameans who were defeated by Israel thought that the defeat was because “their gods are gods of the hills.” Even David, in his last encounter with Saul (1 Sam 26:19-20) reflects this general idea: “They have now driven me from my share in the Lord’s inheritance and have said, ‘Go serve other gods.’” The thought was that the Lord could be properly worshiped only in the land of Israel.

<sup>7</sup>The visions of Ezekiel at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River and the prophetic word that followed were clear testimony of Yahweh’s presence in the land of exile (Ezek 3:12-15).

<sup>8</sup>Note the refrain of the Jerusalemites, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” (Jer 7:4).

<sup>9</sup>Ephraim Stern, internationally recognized Israeli archaeologist and expert on the Persian period, has stated “. . . in the areas of the country occupied by Jews [after the return from exile], not a single cultic figurine has been found!” In “Religion in Palestine in the Assyrian and Persian Periods,” in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times*, ed. by B. Becking & M.C.A. Korpel, *Outestamentische Studien*, 42, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), pp. 245-255. See also E. Stern, “What Happened to the Cult Figurines? Israelite Religion Purified after the Exile,” *BAR* 15:4 (1982): 22-29, 53-54.

<sup>10</sup>J. Andrew Dearman, *Religion & Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), p. 105.

Ezra on the Jerusalem community in his reforms (Ezra 9–10). Fourth, prayer and the study of the word of the Lord became a substitute for animal sacrifice and a means of worship. This would prove to be a temporary development in terms of those who did return to Jerusalem. There the focus of worship returned to the temple and the altar of the Lord, while in Babylon the temporary development became permanent.

The descendants of those who were taken into exile did not all choose to return to the Promised Land. They and others who voluntarily settled throughout the world came to be known as the Diaspora. Male Jews of the Diaspora were expected to make pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem after it was rebuilt, thus retaining a connection with worship in the temple. Pilgrimages were especially made in connection with the religious festivals, such as the Feast of Pentecost. The multitudes gathered in Jerusalem, as reported in Acts 2:5, gives evidence that a religious practice begun some six hundred years earlier had continued generation after generation.

In Babylon the foundations of group meetings were laid that would ultimately result in the development of the synagogue, not as a substitute for a temple but as a place of prayer and study. The beginning of such meetings was evidently the assembling of those in exile to hear the word of the Lord from Ezekiel (Ezek 33:30-33).

From Jerusalem a faithful remnant had brought with them to Babylon the most precious items they could carry. These included scrolls like the one found in the temple in Josiah's time. Other historical records, prophetic sayings, songs used in worship, legal and wisdom materials were carried to Babylon and assembled into many of the books of the Hebrew Bible in the form we now have them in our Old Testament.

In this environment, the role of the sage and the scribe grew in importance. Ezra, who assembled and taught the people in Jerusalem, was known as a סֹפֵר מְדַבֵּר (*sōphēr mādḥâr*), a ready, or able, scribe in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). (This is translated in the NIV as “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses.”) Of course he was also a priest, one of the elite of biblical society who were literate, in contrast to the bulk of society who were illiterate. We assume he continued in Jerusalem what was common practice in Babylon.

In Babylon Israelite religion was transformed into an early form of Judaism. A modern Jewish rabbi has observed:

. . . that which scholars call ‘late Judaism,’ or ‘Rabbinic Judaism,’ has its origins and evolution in the period of Israel’s monarchy and even earlier. Proto-Judaism/Judaism never ceased evolving and changing. The quintessential theological doctrines, ethical principles, and rituals were present from the dim beginnings of Israel’s odyssey. . . .

In the fifth to fourth centuries B.C.E.,<sup>11</sup> Ezra and Nehemiah brought about a religious revival. Prior to this renewal, the biblical faith cannot be said to have had a name which can be verified in primary sources. Only after postexilic Judah became the successor state to the old northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, and after it laid sole claim to preserving the older Yahwistic religion and Mosaic tradition, is it proper to refer to this religion as ‘Judaism.’<sup>12</sup>

Other significant changes developed within the exilic community in Babylon. One change was the adoption of the Babylonian calendar. The calendrical system in use prior to the exile is unclear. Four month-names are known: Abib, Ziv, Ethanim, and Bul.<sup>13</sup> The first two have not been identified in Canaanite or Phoenician sources, but the latter two are Canaanite names. That the Israelites would use Canaanite names for the months is understandable since the Hebrew language is a form of Canaanite (Isa 19:18). However, the months in pre-exilic biblical texts are normally referred to by ordinal numbers, for example, “the first month” (Deut 16:1). This practice continued in use long after the Babylonian month names were adopted. The Hebrew form of the Babylonian months are: Nisan, Iyyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul, Tishri, Marcheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar. Nehemiah 2:1 refers to Nisan; 6:15 mentions Elul, while Kislev occurs in 1:1. Adar is found in Ezra 6:15.

In Babylon the people from Judah switched from speaking

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<sup>11</sup>The abbreviation B.C.E., standing for “Before the Common Era,” is used by many as a substitution for B.C., “Before Christ.”

<sup>12</sup>Phillip Sigal, *Judaism: The Evolution of a Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 31.

<sup>13</sup>*ABD*, I:814.

Hebrew to Aramaic. The use of Hebrew as a literary and religious language was not lost, but Aramaic became the predominant tongue because it had already gained widespread use as an international language.<sup>14</sup> Aramaic then played a role similar to that of English now. Thus we find formal communications back and forth between officials in the provinces and the capital written in Aramaic, as recorded in Ezra 4:11-22, 5:7-17, 6:3-12, and 7:11-26. Further, when the Law was read in Jerusalem before the assembled people, it was read in Hebrew. The Levites then translated the Hebrew into Aramaic and taught the meaning of the Hebrew texts that were read (Neh 8:1-8).

Life in captivity not only brought a change of language but also a concurrent change in the script used to write Hebrew. The pre-exilic Hebrew alphabet was linear in form, similar to the related script of the Phoenicians. These Old Hebrew letters were never forgotten, but the more rounded Aramaic script, which is called Hebrew today, largely displaced their usage. The Aramaic script is mentioned twice in Ezra 4:7.

## **THE PERSIAN CONQUEST OF THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE**

### **THE BABYLONIANS**

Nebuchadnezzar II was the predominant figure in the dynasty that ruled Babylon from 626–539 B.C. His father, Nabopolassar, wrested control of southern Mesopotamia from the Assyrians. In this venture he had the help of allies to the east – the Medes and their king, Cyaxeres.<sup>15</sup> We will note the rise of Cyaxeres and the Medes below but observe here that frequently in history political allies may in time become foes. In 612 B.C. Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes joined forces to destroy the capital city, Nineveh, in the heart of the Assyrian Empire. The final end of Assyrian domination came in 605 with their defeat, along with their Egyptian allies led by Pharaoh

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<sup>14</sup>Note 2 Kgs 18:26, where in 701 B.C. the Judean leaders asked the chief officer of the Assyrians to speak to them in Aramaic, which the general populace did not understand, rather than in Hebrew, the language of the man in the street.

<sup>15</sup>*ABD*, IV:978.

Necho, at the Battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates River. In that same year Nabopolassar died and his son, Nebuchadnezzar, commander of his armies, took the throne. Providentially, in that year Nebuchadnezzar also took control of Jerusalem and Judah, along with much of the ancient Near East (Jer 25:8-14; 46:1-12). Thereafter Judean kings served at the pleasure of the Babylonian monarch. Therefore, when Jehoiakim, followed by his son, Jehoiachin, rebelled, the Babylonian response followed. Jerusalem was conquered in the spring of 597. Nebuchadnezzar placed Zedekiah in control of Judah. A decade later he rebelled. The Babylonian army responded by destroying Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord (2 Kgs 24:1-25:21). Many Judeans were swept away into captivity.

Those in exile lived in Babylon and the surrounding region. Nebuchadnezzar was in the process of rebuilding and beautifying Babylon, and no doubt the skilled artisans of Judah were involved in the project. The mighty monarch filled the city with magnificent temples and palaces, broad streets and beautifully decorated gates, as well as wonders of the ancient world – the hanging gardens and a bridge across the Euphrates River. The city was dedicated to its patron deity, Marduk. Daniel 4:30 reflects the grandeur that was Babylon. A dim echo of that past glory was recovered in the German excavations of the site from A.D. 1899–1917.<sup>16</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. and was succeeded by his son, Amel-Marduk, who is referred to in Jeremiah 52:31 as Evil-Merodach, derived from Babylonian *amel marduk*, “Man of Marduk.” He released the captive King Jehoiachin from prison and maintained him in the palace complex (2 Kgs 25:27; Jer 52:31).<sup>17</sup> Evil-Merodach ruled but two years before his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, assassinated him. This is the same Nergal-sharezer noted in Jeremiah 39:3, when he was an officer in Nebuchadnezzar’s army. His rule was also short (560–556 B.C.). His son, Labashi-marduk, succeeded him and ruled less than a year before a palace rebellion replaced him with a military leader named Nabonidus.

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<sup>16</sup>Many of the artifacts uncovered by the director of excavations, Robert Koldewey, are in a museum in Berlin. The Iraqi government has reconstructed some of the ruins to enhance the understanding of tourist visitors.

<sup>17</sup>Administrative documents recovered from Babylon refer to rations provided to Jehoiachin, king of Judah (*ANET*, p. 308).

Nabonidus ruled from 555–539 B.C., but his interests were more centered on religious matters than affairs of state, perhaps because his remarkable mother, Adad-guppi (who lived for 104 years!), was high priestess of the temple of Sin, the moon-goddess, in Harran in northern Syria.<sup>18</sup> He rebuilt that temple and focused his attention on the other centers of moon worship at Ur in Babylon and at the desert oasis of Tema in Arabia. For whatever reasons, he chose to spend the last several years of his reign living in Tema, five hundred miles across the Arabian desert from Babylon, leaving the government in control of his son, Belshazzar.<sup>19</sup> Some of the Jewish troops accompanying Nabonidus were likely the nucleus of colonies he established at oases in western Arabia.<sup>20</sup> Centuries later when Islam began, five of the oases were already occupied by Jews.

Nabonidus had neglected the religious duties of a Babylonian ruler. This angered the priests of Marduk because he failed to appear for the annual New Year's rituals in which the king had unique responsibilities. This was taken as a betrayal of the city's protective god, Marduk. Belshazzar was a poor choice for regent. Something of his character is reflected in the infamous feast in which he had the vessels of the temple of Yahweh brought out of storage so that his nobles, wives, and concubines could drink from them (Daniel 5). Supported by the Marduk priesthood, the people of Babylon turned against Belshazzar and openly welcomed the Persian conqueror, Cyrus. He took the city in a bloodless conquest on the very night Belshazzar was engaged in his infamous party.

## THE PERSIANS

The Medes and the Persians were descendants of tribal groups who migrated south out of the Russian steppes several centuries before they became a power in the ancient world. They came to occupy and dominate what we call Iran today. The first historical

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<sup>18</sup>W.W. Hallo & W.K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 147-149.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup>H.W.F. Saggs, "Babylon," in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. by D.W. Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 47.

mention of the Medes is in Assyrian texts of the ninth century B.C. They were initially the most powerful tribal group in the region.

The Assyrians campaigned against “the mighty Medes,” and Sargon II, whom we know as the conqueror of Samaria and exiler of a Median leader, Deioces, to Syria in 715 B.C. Deioces had united the Medes and had established his capital at Ecbatana (modern Hamadan). Subsequent Assyrian rulers negotiated treaties with Median rulers in which the latter ruled as vassals under their Assyrian overlords.

The major figure in the development of Median power was Cyaxares, whom we noted above as an ally of Nabopolassar in the rebellion against the Assyrians. The Greek historian Herodotus recorded that Cyaxares (625–585 B.C.) reorganized the Median army and defeated the Scythians who had dominated Media for twenty-eight years. (The Scythians were fierce horse-nomads from the Russian steppes to the north.) Under his leadership the Medes conquered the ancient city of Asshur, the titular Assyrian center. Then he and Nabopolassar established an alliance, sealed by the marriage of a Median princess to Nebuchadnezzar. (It was for this wife that Nebuchadnezzar built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.)<sup>21</sup> As noted earlier, the allies then attacked and destroyed Nineveh. Toward the end of his reign, Cyaxares campaigned against the Lydian kingdom in Asia Minor. A peace between the two opponents was ultimately arranged with the Halys River as the border; the political arrangement was sealed with a marriage between a Lydian princess and Astyages, the son of Cyaxares.

Astyages succeeded his father and ruled from 585–550 B.C. His daughter married a Persian and gave birth to Cyrus the Great. The Persian kingdom, located to the south of Media, had developed in the shadow of the Medes and was subservient to them. Unfortunately for Astyages, his grandson Cyrus led a successful revolt of the Persians against the Medes and in 550 B.C. established control over all the territory of the Medes and Persians. This event ushered in the Persian period, which is also known as the Achaemenid era, named after Achaemenes, an illustrious ancestor of the family line. Persia was destined to expand and control much of the eastern Mediter-

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<sup>21</sup>Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pp. 53-54.

ranean world, including Egypt, as well as Mesopotamia and Asia all the way to India. The Persian Empire lasted over two centuries compared to the relatively short-lived (Neo)Babylonian domination of less than a century. Its demise came in 330 B.C. with the conquest of Alexander the Great.

Cyrus set out to expand the kingdom of the Medes and Persians by marching westward, across Upper Mesopotamia, Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia before confronting Croesus, king of Lydia. Croesus is remembered for his treasures of gold, and tradition has it that a predecessor, the Lydian king Gyges, was the first to invent coinage.<sup>22</sup> This conquest has been dated to 547–546 B.C. Having established his dominance in the west, Cyrus apparently spent the years 546–540 consolidating his control over the eastern region of his empire. Then he turned his attention to the conquest of Babylon.

As early as 543, Nabonidus had returned to Babylon after his long absence in Tema, apparently having been informed of the unsettled conditions in the capital city. Disgruntled priests and people were losing patience with Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Already some Babylonians had defected to the Persian side, the most significant of whom was Gubaru, governor of Gutium to the north of Babylon on the Zagros River. Cyrus, with the cooperation of Gubaru and his forces, won a battle with the Babylonian army at Opis on the Tigris River. He was then in position to threaten Babylon. On October 12, 539, Babylon was taken for Cyrus by Gubaru and his troops.<sup>23</sup> The Nabonidus Chronicle indicates that entrance to the city was “without a battle,” a victory in part due to the tactic employed of diverting the Euphrates River to allow entrance into the city along its waterbed.<sup>24</sup> Cyrus did not enter the city himself until October 29, whereupon he was welcomed as a liberating hero. The Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in Babylon in 1879, provides the conqueror’s view of the events:

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 82, n. 82.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>24</sup>A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin, 1975), p. 110. The Greek historian Herodotus noted the diversion of the river (1.191); the biblical account of events on that fateful night is recorded in Daniel 5. Nabonidus was taken prisoner; Belshazzar was killed.

When I, well-disposed, entered Babylon, I set up the seat of dominion in the royal palace amidst jubilation and rejoicing. Marduk the great god caused the big-hearted inhabitants of Babylon to . . . me. I sought daily to worship him. My numerous troops moved about undisturbed in the midst of Babylon. I did not allow any to terrorize the land of [Sumer] and Akkad (southern Mesopotamia). I kept in view the needs of Babylon and all its sanctuaries to promote their well-being.<sup>25</sup>

Cyrus rewarded Gubaru for his faithful service by making him satrap over the Babylonian province.<sup>26</sup> A satrap ruled a region called a satrapy on behalf of the Persian monarch. He raised taxes needed for his administration and troops for the king's needs. Imperial troops under royal officers stationed within a satrapy as well as royal inspectors made certain that satraps acted responsibly toward the king. The entire Persian Empire was efficiently organized into satrapies, including Syria-Palestine to which the descendants of those in exile would return.

The conquests of Cyrus brought the exiled Jews under Persian control. Compared to the rule of the Babylonian Empire, the Persian rulers adopted a reasonably benevolent approach to their subject peoples. Cyrus allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands and rebuilt their temples. The Cyrus Cylinder says:

From . . . to the cities of Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the cities of Zamban, Meturnu, Der, as far as the region of the land of Gutium, the holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes. I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored (to them) their dwellings. The gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus had, to the anger of the lord of the gods, brought into Babylon, I at the bidding of Marduk, the great lord, made to dwell in peace in their habitations, delightful abodes. May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my

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<sup>25</sup>D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup>Gubaru is noted as Cyrus' district-governor in the *Nabonidus Chronicle*; see *ibid.*, p. 82.

favor before Bel and Nabu, that my days be long, and may they say to Marduk my lord, 'May Cyrus the king who reveres thee, and Cambyses his son . . . .'<sup>27</sup>

It was in the spirit of this policy that the Jews were encouraged to return to Jerusalem (2 Chr 36:23; Ezra 1:2-4).

The events in Ezra–Nehemiah occurred between 538 B.C. (the first return) and ca. 408 B.C. The latter date is derived from the Elephantine papyrus letter addressed to Bagohi, governor of Judah, and to Johanan the High Priest and his priest colleagues.<sup>28</sup> Although Nehemiah was no longer governor, the High Priest Johanan is identified with the Johanan of Nehemiah 12:22.<sup>29</sup> What the author of Ezra–Nehemiah considered significant for his work is drawn from a period of approximately 130 years and compressed into the form of the book that has come down to us.

The last high priest mentioned in Nehemiah 12:22 is Jaddua.<sup>30</sup> His name in the list may be a later addition since we know nothing of him except what Josephus reports (*Ant* XI.viii). He held office in the last days of the Persian Empire before Alexander the Great overthrew Darius III Codomannus in 332 B.C.

## THE GREEKS

Greeks and Greek influences were evident in much of the Persian Empire, and particularly in the East Mediterranean, long before Alexander's conquest. But that conquest brought Greek culture into immediate and continuing contact with the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the province of Yehud as well as the large Jewish Diaspora that developed in Egypt under the Ptolemies. The Greek cultural influ-

<sup>27</sup>Thomas, *Documents*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 260-269. Cf. *ABD*, II:445-455. The Elephantine papyri were discovered in Egypt beginning in 1893 and consisted of the archive of a Jewish colony of mercenary soldiers and their families from ca. 650-400 B.C.

<sup>29</sup>These papyri also indicate that Samaria was then governed by Delaiah and Shelemaiah, sons of Sanballat, Nehemiah's adversary.

<sup>30</sup>Hugh G.M. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 [Waco: Word, 1985], p. 365) believes the reference is a later gloss and refers to Darius I.

ences have been named Hellenism, resulting in the descriptive term “Hellenistic” for the period from Alexander to the appearance of Roman power in Palestine in 63 B.C.<sup>31</sup>

A powerful wave of influence followed in the wake of the Macedonian’s armies. The power of a foreign, technologically superior culture began to weaken the traditional disciplines of oriental life, replacing them with Greek modes of thought and activity. The tendency to assimilate Greek ways was particularly strong in Jerusalem among the upper-class citizens, the commercial and political aristocracy.

Following the death of Alexander in 323 B.C., his empire disintegrated into major segments under the control of several of his generals. Ptolemy I acquired the rule of Egypt and also controlled Palestine. The Ptolemies established a benign policy toward the Palestinian territory. Judea was permitted to maintain self-government under the high priest, who combined religious and political authority. The major mark of Egyptian domination was the heavy tribute that was exacted, not greatly different from the previous Persian practices. The Ptolemies initiated a tax-farming program whereby local appointees collected the taxes and forwarded them to the Egyptian authorities, with the local agent receiving a commission in return for his services. In this manner local aristocrats, including members of the high priestly family, came to have a vested interest in the Ptolemaic regime. They also developed a tendency to assimilate to the Greek way of life, and a hellenizing party thus arose among the ranks of the wealthy and priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem. In time a reaction against Hellenism was to develop, leading finally to the Maccabean revolt.

It is in the early years of these influences we believe the author of Ezra–Nehemiah compiled the book as a reminder of their recent history and as countervailing instruction against the hellenizing tendencies that were beginning to become apparent.

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, one vol. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

## THE COMPOSITION OF EZRA–NEHEMIAH

### DATE

Ezra traveled to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. Nehemiah's last recorded activities were late in the reign of Artaxerxes I, who reigned until 425 B.C. The first-person materials relating to their ministries would have been combined ca. 400 B.C. The position taken in this commentary is that the book as we have it was likely compiled for the benefit of the Jewish community in Jerusalem and Judah by the editor within a quarter century after Alexander's conquest, ca. 300 B.C.

### SOURCES

The first-person materials in Ezra–Nehemiah are generally identified as the Ezra Memoirs and the Nehemiah Memoirs. The original forms of these probably comprised written reports given to the Persian monarch after the completion of their respective assignments. Copies of these would have been retained in the temple archives in Jerusalem. Other related materials in the form of genealogical lists, names of priests and Levites, etc., were also kept in the archives and were available to the editor. The variety of materials evident in the work indicates that the compiler drew on varied sources in producing the final book.

### AUTHORSHIP

Jewish tradition holds that Ezra 'wrote' his book. That does not mean, however, that the work was originally his in its entirety. It is obvious that he incorporated other documents that were available, in particular the decree of Cyrus and the letter of Artaxerxes I. In this view it is also acknowledged that other records may have been included, such as documents preserved in the temple treasury as well as correspondence between Persian officials in Jerusalem and their king in his capital. Ezra might also have had available preserved lists of clans, families, officials, and accounts of building operations. It is understood that he incorporated the records of Nehemiah into the one work.

Another view held by many scholars is that Ezra–Nehemiah was produced by the author of Chronicles as a supplement to that work. Another somewhat related explanation is that the original ending of Chronicles was what is now known as 1 Esdras.<sup>32</sup>

A review of compositional theories and arguments may be found in articles in Bible encyclopedias and in the introductions to critical commentaries. In our study we have chosen to follow generally the carefully reasoned suggestions of H.G.M. Williamson.<sup>33</sup> The first-person materials of Ezra and those of Nehemiah have been combined along with other records by an editor or compiler sometime after the events took place.

The final author of Ezra–Nehemiah was aware of the general chronology of events in the restoration of God’s people to Jerusalem and the surrounding region, but strict chronology was not his driving concern. His design was to emphasize two important accomplishments of Ezra and Nehemiah: the return and reconstruction (Part One, Ezra 1:1–Neh 7:3) and renewal and reform (Part Two, Neh 7:4–13:31). Strong, significant undercurrents were inherent in these overarching emphases. The community of the returnees was experiencing a second exodus and occupation of the land in the face of opposition. The renewed community was directly connected to and derived from pre-exilic Israel. The Law of God was to be the basis for life and worship. God’s people must remain ethnically pure and the rebuilt temple ritually clean. And permeating the whole was

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<sup>32</sup>First Esdras was but one of several ancient books that bear the name of Ezra, pointing to stories about him that arose after his time and expanded on his reputation. It survived as one of the books of the Apocrypha in its Greek form as a part of the LXX. The theory proposes that Ezra and Nehemiah were created from 1 Esdras material with substantial revision and elaboration. The Apocrypha also contains 2 Esdras, an apocalypse, in which Ezra receives seven revelations. Ezra is called to rewrite all the sacred books of Israel which have been destroyed. He was to make public twenty-four of these (the Hebrew canon) and to hide the other seventy. While outside the canon, they were to be given to the wise among his people. For further information on these books, the Apocrypha, and the somewhat related Pseudepigrapha, see D.S. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).

<sup>33</sup>H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

an appreciation for the veiled hand of God at work to accomplish his will in all of these events.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH**

The recollection of the return from Babylon and the reestablishment of Jewish life in Jerusalem and its environs under a foreign power was an example for the writer's era. The change of ruling power from Persian to Greek brought new challenges to the Jewish community in the old homeland as well as the Diaspora. The enticements to intermarriage and the attraction of Hellenistic culture began to threaten the erosion of religious patterns established by Ezra and Nehemiah. And the establishment of a rival Samaritan temple to the north on Mount Gerizim competed with the authority of the Jerusalem sanctuary.<sup>34</sup> Ezra-Nehemiah was a call to remember the struggles of the past that had made the Jewish community viable, a summons to walk in the old ways rather than be enticed away from God by the appeal of Hellenism. Ultimately their work paved the way for the survival of Judaism until "the fulness of time had come" (Gal 4:4).

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<sup>34</sup>The schism between Samaritans and Jews was rooted in the events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah but reached fruition on the eve of Alexander's conquest. Sanballat III, grandson of Nehemiah's adversary, built the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim about 332 B.C. and established his son-in-law as high priest. That son-in-law was from the high priestly family in Jerusalem who had been expelled for marrying Sanballat's daughter. (Cf. Josephus, *Ant* XI.302-325.)